

# Time is of the essence: temporal transformations in ekphrasis

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Ever since the days of da Vinci's *Paragone*, the focus when discussing the relations between various arts and media has been on their differences. I say this even though there have been numerous attempts over the centuries to minimize those perceived differences: take for example the pictorialist movement among poets in the 18th century, encouraged by Joseph Addison (Lund 1992: 96) and despised by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, or the romanticist longing for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> Those attempts to bridge over what were seen as natural differences – the “naturalness” of the iconic sign versus the conventionality of the symbolic sign, the *stasis* of visual arts versus the temporality of poetry – in many ways can be said to have had the opposite effect: based on the assumption that the differences between the arts were inherent, the attempts merely underlined the issues they were meant to overcome.

However, today the study of intermedial relations seems to have another focus: the similarities of arts and media. One of the earliest modern advocates for this view is W. J. T. Mitchell. In 1986, he wrote that “there is no *essential* difference between poetry and painting, no difference, that is, that is given for all times by the inherent natures of the media, the objects they represent, or the laws of the human mind” (ibid.: 49), and in his essay “There are

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be described as a wish to unite all arts into one (Bisanz 1975: 38), and a genre that met the demands of the romanticist poets to be able to represent the whole internal world of emotions and imagination.

no visual media” (2005) he underlines that a pure media product, free from traces of other media, does not exist: “all media are mixed media”:

That is, the very notion of a medium and of mediation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements. There are no purely auditory, tactile or olfactory media either. However, this conclusion does not lead to the impossibility of distinguishing one medium from another. What it makes possible is a more precise differentiation of mixtures. If all media are mixed media, they are not all mixed in the same way, with the same proportions of elements. (Mitchell 2005: 260)

The differences thus lie in how media products are mixed, the fact that they are is not in question. Claus Clüver agrees and states that intermediality

concerns such transmedial phenomena as narrativity, parody, and the implied reader/listener/viewer as well as the intermedial aspects of the intertextualities inherent in individual texts – and the inevitable intermedial character of each medium. (Clüver 2007: 32–33)

The insight that all media are mixed in some way demands, according to Jørgen Bruhn, a new term. Since the term *intermedia* implies that the focus should lie between media, a fitting notion for the focus of relations within various media or media products should, according to Bruhn, be *heteromediality*:

This new, multimodal definition of medium raises not only a number of analytical and epistemological questions but also a basic terminological question: is ‘intermediality’ still the best term to describe the multimodal character of all media and, consequently, the *a priori* mixed character of all conceivable texts? The term intermediality is too limited to satisfy the demands of the new multimodal theory of medium. Therefore I will suggest a new umbrella term, heteromediality, to describe any conceivable text, whereas I reserve the term intermediality to parts of heteromediality. (Bruhn 2010: 229).

What consequences are there for the research field of intermediality if we begin to focus more and more on relations inside media and media products

and less on relations between them? One answer is that we need to find new analytical tools to be able to capture these internal relations. The four *modalities of media* (the material modality, the sensorial modality, the spatiotemporal modality and the semiotic modality), as suggested and introduced by Lars Ellström (2010), have proven themselves to be fine-tuned instruments that meet the demands of a more nuanced analytical approach. Basically, the modalities answer the following questions: *What is a medium made of? How do we experience it? How does it manifest itself in time and space? Which main sign system does it use?* If we understand how a media product, for example a photograph, works on a modality level, it is easier to see what it has in common with other media or media products, and what separates them.

Thus, I am convinced that there *are* essential differences between media, but that the differences do not always lie where we think they lie, and that is the starting point for this essay, where I will look into the relations between two kinds of media products, namely visual, static, iconic media products such as painting or photography, and verbal, printed text, and how they relate to each other in one specific genre: *ekphrasis*, and in one specific mode: temporality.

### Temporality and stasis

Since Gotthold Ephraim Lessing wrote his immensely influential essay *Laocoon: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (*Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*) in 1766, static, visual, iconic media and verbal, printed media have been distinguished from each other by means of spatiotemporality, since Lessing claimed that poetry is a temporal art, unraveling in time, and the visual arts are spatial, existing as shapes in space. Lessing formulated the problem that we all still have to deal with, whether we agree with him or not.<sup>2</sup> One of the problems is that in this discussion, “spatial” seems to be equivalent to “static”, as Mitchell points out:

“Spatial form”, as it is defined in a recent anthology on the subject, “in its simplest sense designates the techniques by which novelists subvert the

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2 Mitchell writes: “Those who attack the confusion of genres entailed in a notion of literary space regularly invoke Lessing’s authority, and the proponents of spatial form pay him homage by making his categories into their fundamental instruments of analysis” (Mitchell 1986: 97).

chronological sequence inherent in narrative" – a definition which suggests that "space" means little more than "atemporal", and which confirms Lessing's claim that chronology is "inherent" in literary art. "Spatial form" in this sense can have no strong theoretical force; it can only be what Frank Kermode calls a "weak figure" for a certain kind of suspended temporality, and there doesn't seem to be any compelling reason for thinking of this phenomenon as "spatial". (Mitchell 1986: 96)

Thus, my intention is to avoid the (false) dichotomy *space* and *time*<sup>3</sup> and concentrate on *time* and *timelessness*. What, then, is timelessness? And what does it mean that a medium is either temporal or static? Elleström stresses that materially, both a book and a painting are static, but because of the "conventional semiotic aspect of language" – the fact that we decode printed text in a certain order – temporality is automatically incorporated in the reading, as well as fixed or partly fixed sequentiality, according to Elleström (2010: 19). Even on the level of the word, the letters must be read in a certain order to be understandable. Thus, given the predetermined order in which we decode most conventional literature, there is a temporal difference between verbal printed text and visual, static, iconic media products. A painting can basically be decoded in any given order; often there is no absolute beginning or end: when are you "done" with a painting? At what exact moment have you seen everything?<sup>4</sup>

This does not mean, however, that a painting cannot represent temporal flow, or that a poem cannot represent stasis. What is interesting is that different media have different means of expressing or representing temporality. Elleström introduces the notion of *virtual time*, which is the time we include in our interpretation of a media product: "Interpretations of still images of

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3 False because space and time are not opposites, and because all media exist and manifest themselves both in space and in time.

4 There are of course exceptions, for example religious icons can represent several images in one, describing a narrative, and in the case of simultaneous succession (Nikolajeva – Scott 2006: 140), common in children's picture books, the same figure is depicted multiple times on a page, representing the figure's way in the room. There is also the case with comic strips, but as Elleström points out, the way the comic strip represents time is not an example of virtual time, but of "an instance of pictorial sequentiality produced by merging conventions of decoding symbolic and iconic signs" (Elleström 2010: 21).

what we, on iconic grounds, take to be moving objects or creatures always include an interpretation of where the object or the creature were ‘before’ or ‘after’ the frozen time in the image” (ibid.: 21). The concept of virtual time is also valid for “all sorts of time represented by verbal narration” (ibid.: 21). Virtual time is thus something that we infer when we take part of a media product.<sup>5</sup> Imagine seeing a photograph where a girl is two feet up in the air. Your immediate interpretation would probably not be that she is flying, nor that she is standing on something invisible, but that she is jumping, and that the photograph has captured her movements at the precise moment when she is up in the air. When you decide that you believe that she is jumping, you include the whole act in your interpretation of the depicted moment: Leaving the floor, being in the air, and returning to the floor again. When someone acts, the act occurs in time, and thereby, depicting a moment of an action is one way for a static image to represent time.

A static image cannot say, as the verbal text can, “time is passing”. The static image has to *show* that time passes, and can do so by representing actions or indexes of movement, for example blurred lines in a photograph (ibid.: 21). Other examples are high waves in a sea or trees bowed in one direction, both indexes of wind that in its turn creates movement.

A narrative text presupposes temporal flow: If something happens, it must happen over the course of time. Many actions described rapidly after one another give the text an air of haste, of motion, while fewer actions reduce the speed. But if a text can represent motion and time passing, it must also be able to represent stasis and time *not passing*. If the text totally lacks narrative elements, if nothing happens or no one moves, it is characterized by what I call *virtual timelessness*, the experience that no time passes in a text. There are many ways to achieve virtual timelessness in a text: it can be done by using few dynamic verbs and a lot of concrete nouns and adjectives, but also by means of stylistic devices such as repetition, which we will see later on. Dynamic texts that describe motion and static texts that describe stasis are the two main categories focused on in this essay.

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5 Elleström comes to the following conclusion: “virtual space and virtual time can be said to be manifest in the perception and interpretation of a medium when what is taken to be the *represented* spatiotemporal state is not the same as the spatiotemporal state of the *representing* material modality considered through the spatiotemporal modality” (ibid.: 21; highlighted by LE).

## Two types of image descriptions

In her research on picture description, cognitive researcher Jana Holšánová (2008) conducted an experiment where twelve participants got to look at a picture from Sven Nordqvist's famous Swedish picture book series about the old man Pettson and his cat Findus. After the participants had looked at it, the picture was removed and they had to describe it from memory. Holšánová identified two different descriptive styles: *the static description style* and *the dynamic description style*.<sup>6</sup> The former is characterized, among other things, by “dominance of spatial perception”, “numerous and precise localisations”, “a detailed description”, “static description”, “no temporal expressions”, “many and exact spatial expressions”, “a high frequency of presentational expressions: ‘there is’, ‘there are’, ‘it is’, ‘it was’, etc.”, “mainly nouns, few dynamic verbs, mostly auxiliary and position verbs” (Holšánová 2008: 62).

The latter is characterised, among other things, by “dominance of temporal perception”, “many temporal expressions”, “sequential description of events according to a schema”, focusing on temporal differences in the picture”, “dynamic descriptions”, “temporal verbs, temporal adverbs, temporal subordinate clauses, prepositions”, “few spatial expressions, less precise”, “many dynamic motion verbs” (ibid.: 62).

Holšánová (2008: 69) connects the dynamic description type to verbalizers and the static description style to visualizers, but also agrees that there is evidence that speaks in favour of a distinction between *spatial* and *iconic (object) visualizers*.<sup>7</sup> Thus, apart from the *visualizer/verbalizer description style*, there is one other distinction to be made: the one between spatial visualizers and iconic or object visualizers. The spatial visualizers focus more on the spatial relations and the object/iconic more on shapes, colors and nuances.

From a modality point of view, the difference between verbalizers and visualizers can be described as either focusing on the static materiality of the image (what Elleström calls “the material modality considered through the spatiotemporal modality”, Elleström 2010: 21), or on what narrative impulse, to borrow an expression from James A. W. Heffernan, the image triggers:

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6 The two styles have been investigated and discussed earlier in the research field of cognitive science; see for example Kozhevnikov – Hegarty – Mayer 2002 and Kozhevnikov – Kosslyn – Shephard 2005.

7 A distinction also made by Kozhevnikov – Hegarty – Mayer 2002 and Kozhevnikov – Kosslyn – Shephard 2005.

describe what you see, or describe the “story” of the picture (the virtual time of the image).

### The ekphrastic choice

It has been debated, however, whether *ekphrasis*, commonly defined as “a verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 1993: 3), is a static or dynamic phenomenon. Heffernan considers it to be mainly narrative, focusing on the pregnant moment and including the virtual time of the image in the ekphrastic transformation:

The “pregnant moment” of an action is the arrested point which most clearly implies what came before the moment and what is to follow it. [...] ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers *from the pregnant moment* of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication. [...] the instability of the boundaries between description and narration makes it implausible to identify ekphrasis with anything like pure description, or to define it simply as a brake on narrative progression. (Heffernan 1993: 5, 6)

Other scholars, such as Wendy Steiner and Murray Krieger, consider ekphrasis to be static in its nature, or at least, to strive towards stasis:

Dependent as it is on literary sources, the pregnant moment in painting has in turn generated a literary topos in which poetry is to imitate the visual arts by stopping time, or more precisely, by referring to an action through a still moment that implies it. The technical term for this is *ekphrasis*, the concentration of action in a single moment of energy, and it is a direct borrowing from the visual arts. (Steiner 1982: 41)

According to Krieger, stasis is the purpose of ekphrasis: “to use a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to ‘still’ it” (Krieger 1992: 266). Hans Lund in his turn argues that there are two kinds of ekphrasis: the dynamic, “narrative ekphrasis”, and the static, “the ekphrasis of the frozen moment” (Lund 1992: 186, my translation). I agree with Lund that ekphrastic texts can be both dynamic and static; the question is *why* some

of them are dynamic and others static. Is it a matter of choice, or is there another reason? In her investigations of the two description styles, Holšánová gives some cognitive and contextual explanations to the difference in description modes that are not due solely to personal inclination in the describer. One of them touches upon what has been said earlier, that the describer can choose either to focus on the material stasis of a media product or on the story it tells: whether the participants verbalised “the picture as a representation” or if they focused “on the content of the represented scene” (Holšánová 2008: 65). Another explanation that she points to is familiarity with the described picture. If a participant in the experiment was familiar with the picture or the characters, the description tended to be more dynamic (ibid.: 65). A reason for this is probably that the image is a reminder of what the describer already knows about the characters and their adventures, and the tendency to tell a story rather than describe: “One could expect that if the informants have read the book (to themselves or to their children), the picture will remind them of the story and the style will become dynamic and narrative” (ibid.: 65).<sup>8</sup> In another part of the experiment the effect of the so-called *priming* was investigated. The participants listened to a pre-recorded description of the image, which focused on its spatial relations, and to some degree it influenced the participant’s own descriptions, so that they became more spatial. In the narrative priming, the task was to “tell a story about what happens in the picture” (ibid.: 73). The narrative priming affected the descriptions, which became more temporal and narrative (ibid.: 75).<sup>9</sup>

Another factor, according to Holšánová, is the characteristics of the described picture: “[...] this particular picture, with its repetitive figures, may have affected the way it was described” (ibid.: 65). In my opinion, the characteristics of the represented image constitute a very important factor. Some visual, static, iconic media products contain more indexes of movement and temporality, more virtual time, than others: Compare the static composition

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8 One might wonder if the outcome would have been the same if the chosen picture did not come from a picture book that includes both pictures and text.

9 Another contextual explanation for the two styles is suggested: that they only occur when someone is listening to the descriptions, that the styles are “conversationally determined” (ibid.: 76). However, I do not believe that the two styles only exist when someone is listening, I cannot see any reason to make that hypothesis, but of course it has to be tested in order to be determined true or false.



of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (1503–1507) to Degas' *Café-Concert at Les Ambassadeurs* (1876–1877), where the lady in red makes a gesture towards the audience, the movement of the arm is represented by means of blurred lines. We tend to interpret virtual time – and thereby be more narrative in our description – into pictures where characters seem to be in the middle of an action (the pregnant moment) to a higher degree compared to portraits or static scenes. However, as mentioned above, the describer has a choice: she can either describe the picture's virtual time or focus on its material stasis. Thus, it is not correct to talk about the stasis of images or the temporality of texts, unless it is clear what modalities are involved: is it the virtual time of the medium (the spatiotemporal modality) or the temporal properties of the medium's materiality (the material modality) that is discussed?

In order to describe the different temporal relations between source image and target text,<sup>10</sup> I propose a model that covers the various aspects of the issue:<sup>11</sup>

1. An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing stasis] resulting in a static effect
2. An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing stasis] resulting in a temporal effect
3. An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing temporality] resulting in a temporal effect
4. An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing temporality] resulting in a static effect

In the following section, I will discuss the four relations and give examples of how they work.

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<sup>10</sup> Tamar Yacobi's terms for the two basic ekphrastic components (1998: 25).

<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember that not all ekphrastic texts are descriptive, either in a narrative or a static way. Some ekphrastic texts simply hint to or mention static, visual, iconic media products in passing (what Elleström calls "simple representation"; 2013: 120). In those cases, it is difficult to apply the temporal model.

**An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing stasis] resulting in a static effect**

Wisława Szymborska: "Landscape"

In the old master's landscape,  
 the trees have roots beneath the oil paint,  
 the path undoubtedly reaches its goal,  
 the signature is replaced by a stately blade of grass,  
 it's a persuasive five in the afternoon,  
 May has been gently, yet firmly, detained,  
 so I've lingered too. Why, of course, my dear,  
 I am the woman there, under the ash tree.

Just see how far behind I've left you,  
 see the white bonnet and the yellow skirt I wear,  
 see how I grip my basket so as not to slip out of the painting,  
 how I strut within another's fate  
 and rest awhile from living mysteries.

Even if you called I wouldn't hear you,  
 and even if I heard I wouldn't turn,  
 and even if I made that impossible gesture  
 your face would seem a stranger's face to me.

I know the world six miles around.  
 I know the herbs and spells for every pain.  
 God still looks down on the crown of my head.  
 I still pray I won't die suddenly.  
 War is punishment and peace is a reward.  
 Shameful dreams all come from Satan.  
 My soul is as plain as the stone of a plum.

I don't know the games of the heart.  
 I've never seen my children's father naked.  
 I don't see the crabbed and blotted draft

that hides behind the Song of Songs.  
 What I want to say comes in ready-made phrases.  
 I never use despair, since it isn't really mine,  
 Only given to me for safekeeping.

Even if you bar my way,  
 even if you stare me in the face,  
 I'll pass you by on the chasm's edge, finer than a hair.

On the right is my house. I know it from all sides,  
 along with its steps and its entryway,  
 behind which life goes on unpainted.  
 The cat hops on a bench,  
 the sun gleams on a pewter jug,  
 a bony man sits at the table  
 fixing a clock.

Wisława Szymborska's poem "Landscape" (first published in 1967) represents an actual or fictional landscape with trees, a woman and a house to the right. Since I am not familiar with the source image (if it exists) I cannot, obviously, be certain about its temporal characteristics, but based on my experience with classical landscape painting, my guess is that it has a static composition with few indexes of movement. Therefore I will treat this poem as an ekphrasis that represents a static source image that in its turn represents stasis, and that the result is that the ekphrasis itself represents stasis. Before I begin my analysis, I want to make clear that there is one argument against this conclusion, and that is the woman's monologue. Sound can only exist in time and unravel in time, and is thus an index of temporal flux. However, in this analysis I place the woman's voice on a meta-level, as a part of the description or interpretation of the painting: not as emanating *from the painting* itself, but as an imaginative voice created and heard by the poetic I, the onlooker. One of the reasons is that the things the woman reveals about herself make it clear that she has no depth; she is only surface, oil paint on a canvas, and so is her environment: "the trees have roots beneath the oil paint" and "the signature is replaced by a stately blade of grass": her knowledge of a possible signature implies that she knows that her world is an artifact. The poem underlines

her two-dimensionality by letting her describe herself as such: “My soul is as plain as the stone of a plum.” She has children, but she has never seen their father without clothes: her life is not real; her body is not made of flesh. Even her phrases are ready-made. She does not concern herself with the mysteries of life or with feelings of despair. She is not a woman – she is a visual representation of a woman, that in the target text is given corresponding characteristics, but in words instead of in colour and shape.

This representation is placed in a landscape where it is always almost May and always five o’clock in the afternoon. The woman is very aware of how limited her world is, that she is stuck both in time and space, but it does not seem to concern her. She knows that in her house, “life goes on unpainted”,<sup>12</sup> but the painting cannot show ongoing life, it can only show one frozen moment of it, and that is the paradox of the ekphrasis: if she is stuck in time and space, how can she know what is going on in the house? She cannot even make a gesture:

Even if you called I wouldn’t hear you,  
and even if I heard I couldn’t turn,  
and even if I made that impossible gesture  
your face would seem a stranger’s face to me.

The unpainted life in the house is the one thing that gives us a glimpse of motion and time, but it is solely an abstract possibility, a hint; there is no narrative progress in the poem, nothing happens, nothing changes. It also almost totally lacks dynamic verbs, most verbs are of a less dynamic type, such as *linger*, *detain*, *rest*, *see* and *stare*. There is no focus on temporal differences and the only temporal marker is that it is “a persuasive five in the afternoon”, which seems to be the case in all eternity. However, we find spatial expressions, such as “In the old master’s landscape”, “under the ash tree” and “on the right”. The virtual timelessness, the experienced stasis, is also underlined by anaphors, which are repetitive and thus help create a sense

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<sup>12</sup> Szyborska seems to be fascinated with the things a painting does not show. For example, in “Rubens’s Women” she writes: “Their skinny sisters woke up earlier, / before dawn broke and shone upon the painting. / And no one saw how they went single file / along the canvas’s unpainted side” (Szyborska 1998 [1962]: 47). In “Frozen Motion” there is a similar motif, which we will see later on.

of motionlessness, as Wendy Steiner points out in connection with a poem by Edward Estlin Cummings: “Another feature of the poem increases its claim to atemporality: the constant repetition of words, rhythmic units, and phrases in a pattern that strongly resembles permutational poetry” (Steiner 1982: 44). “Landscape” ends with a man fixing a clock, and the broken clock is one more sign that time stands still in the world of the painting.

**An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing stasis] resulting in a temporal effect**

Tomas Tranströmer: From *Baltics*

Here are figures in a landscape.  
 A photo from 1865. The steamer is at the pier in the sound.  
 Five figures. A lady in a bright crinoline, like a bell, like a flower.  
 The men are like extras in a rustic play.  
 They're all beautiful, irresolute, in the process of being rubbed out.  
 They step ashore for a little while. They're being rubbed out.  
 The steam launch is an extinct model –  
 high funnel, sunroof, narrow hull –  
 it's utterly foreign, a UFO that's landed.  
 Everything else in the photo is shockingly real:  
 the ripples on the water,  
 the opposite shore –  
 I can stroke my hand over the rough rockfaces,  
 I can hear the sighing in the spruces.  
 It's near. It's  
 today.  
 The waves are topical.

Tomas Tranströmer's poetry book *Baltics* (first published in Swedish in 1974) consists of a number of sections, not separated by titles or chapters, but the ekphrasis discussed here can clearly stand for itself. The source image is unknown, but from the description it is clearly a photographic portrait, taken in 1865, representing a group of people dressed up for the occasion. As we know, the photographic technique back then demanded that people stood

very still for a long time; otherwise it would all just be a blur, which is generally not what is desired in a portrait. We can thus establish that the source image represents stasis. How is it treated in the target text? The poem begins with the introduction of the depicted scene: “Here are figures in a landscape.” Then a detailed description of the group follows: “Five figures. A lady in a bright crinoline, like a bell, like a flower. / The men are like extras in a rustic play.” The similes are concrete in the sense that they provide us with images that we can apply to the description. The short sentences make it easier to structure the inner image; there is no redundant information.

The next two sentences focus on the impermeability of the photographic medium. The photograph is faded, which is a sign of time passing, not the time represented in the photograph, but the time in which it exists; our time: “They’re all beautiful, irresolute, in the process of being rubbed out. / They step ashore for a little while. They’re being rubbed out.” Here, it is the materiality of the photograph that is changing, but it somehow changes the motif as well: the characters become “irresolute” because they are beginning to disappear, to fade away, at the same time as they “step ashore for a little while” (probably to have their photograph taken). Thereafter, the boat is described: it is both extinct and a UFO: from another time and another place. The poetic I cannot relate to it. But then, the photograph comes to life:

Everything else in the photo is shockingly real:  
 the ripples on the water,  
 the opposite shore –  
 I can stroke my hand over the rough rockfaces,  
 I can hear the sighing in the spruces.  
 It’s near. It’s  
 today.  
 The waves are topical.

The landscape is the same; it bridges over time and gives the poetic I a sense of presence almost comparable to the symptoms of the Stendhal Syndrome: He can feel the rocks, he hears the sighing in the spruces, and he experiences the landscape as if he were there. The photograph comes to life, it is filled with temporal flux, sound and motion, the waves are the same as today:

a connection between then and now is established, and the represented stasis of the photograph is transformed into temporality in the target text.

The poem starts out with virtual timelessness and develops into temporality, without using either narrative techniques or a lot of dynamic verbs. However, there are two events taking place in the ekphrasis, which makes it temporal: First the temporal “process of being rubbed out”, which concerns the materiality of the source medium, and then the opposite experience that the photograph is alive or is coming to life under the hands of the poetic I, who can hear and feel the represented landscape and notice movement; waves, ripples on the water.

**An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing temporality] resulting in a temporal effect**

Natalie Safir: “Matisse’s Dance”

A break in the circle dance of naked women,  
dropped stitch between the hands  
of the slender figure stretching too hard  
to reach her joyful sisters.

Spirals of glee sail from the arms  
of the tallest woman. She pulls  
the circle around with her fire.  
What has she found that she doesn’t  
keep losing, her torso  
a green burning torch?

Grass mounds curve ripely beneath  
two others who dance beyond the blue.  
Breasts swell and multiply and  
rhythms rise to a gallop.

Hurry, frightened one and grab on – before  
the stitch is forever lost, before the dance  
unravels and a black sun swirls from that space.

The translation from temporality in an image to temporality in a text is quite common in ekphrasis, and it is not difficult to understand: a source image that conveys motion and temporal flux should inspire to a more temporal description, which we can see in Natalie Safir's poem "Matisse's Dance" (1990), even though the poem actually begins with a "break": "A break in the circle dance of naked women". The letting go of the hands between two of the dancing women is perhaps one of the first details one notices when looking at Matisse's paintings *Dance I* (1909) and *Dance* (1910). The break is also described as a "dropped stitch", where the hands have let go of each other; it is as if the painting is compared to a piece of knitting. One woman stretches out to the other, to be able to reach her hand again, and the pose is filled with virtual movement and time; it is as if the painter has captured the women's movement when the dance is at its climax, when it is going so fast that it is hard to hold on. The woman's effort is emphasized in the poem: she is "stretching too hard". The other women's joy is emphasized, leaving the stretching woman out: is she not happy, is she left out? The fact that she is trying so hard might point to that.

The tallest woman, who I believe is the one farthest left, sends out "spirals of glee" and has a fire that keeps the dance going:

Spirals of glee sail from the arms  
of the tallest woman. She pulls  
the circle around with her fire.

This stanza is full of motion and life: "spirals of glee" emanate from the tall woman, her fire "pulls the circle around", and she is filled with inner energy and power, manifested as "a green burning torch" in her torso. The two final stanzas increase the sense of motion and temporal flux. "Breasts swell and multiply", "rhythms rise to a gallop" in the third stanza and in the last, the one who lost her grip is urged to hurry: otherwise she might not catch up. Here the knitting metaphor is back: "the stitch is forever lost", the dance will "unravel". In its place a black sun – some kind of black hole or antimatter? – will swirl.

The poem is filled with dynamic verbs, such as *stretching*, *hurry*, *swirl*, *grab*, *dance* and *pull*. The only spatial description is that of the grass mounds. The temporal expressions in the last stanza ("before the stitch is forever



lost”, “before the dance unravels”) underline the accelerating tempo of the poem.

**An ekphrastic text representing [a static source image representing temporality] resulting in a static effect**

Wisława Szymborska: “Frozen Motion”

This isn't Miss Duncan, the noted danseuse?  
Not the drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the Bacchante,  
moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?

Standing this way, in the photographer's atelier,  
heftily, fleshily wrested from music and motion,  
she's cast to the mercies of a pose,  
forced to bear false witness.

Thick arms raised above her head,  
a knotted tree knee protrudes from her short tunic,  
left leg forward, naked foot and toes,  
with 5 (count them) toenails.

One short step from eternal art into artificial eternity –  
I reluctantly admit that it's better than nothing  
and more fitting than otherwise.

Behind the screen, a pink corset, a handbag,  
in it a ticket for a steamship  
leaving tomorrow, that is, sixty years ago;  
never again, but still at nine a.m. sharp.

The poem “Frozen Motion” (first published in 1975) begins with a presentation of its object: “This isn't Miss Duncan, the noted danseuse?”<sup>13</sup> Isadora Duncan was a famous dancer who lived between 1877 and 1927. In many pho-

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13 An exact translation from Polish of the first line reads “Miss Duncan, the danseuse”.

tographs, she is depicted in the middle of a dance with shawls, long gowns, and long pieces of cloth, a style that is also represented in the poem: “drifting cloud, the wafting zephyr, the Bacchante, / moonlit waters, waves swaying, breezes sighing?” The description refers, I would say, both to her appearance and her way of dancing, which was unusual in its time, inspired by Hellenistic ideals and an idea of natural movement.<sup>14</sup> Even though we do not have the source image, it is not a wild guess that it is similar to many photographs of her dancing, and what they have in common is that they try to capture either movement or a frozen moment, or movement *through* a frozen moment. The poem however concerns itself with what is actually taking place in the atelier, where the picture is taken.

The described creative process strives to show an arrested moment, but we now know that it is a lie: There is no dance taking place, no music:

Standing this way, in the photographer’s atelier,  
Heftily, fleshily wrested from music and motion,  
She’s cast to the mercies of a pose,  
Forced to bear false witness.

Her whole posture becomes a lie, since she is taken away from the dancer’s natural environment, forced to imitate her own movements without moving at all. Thus the camera did not capture a moment in time, rescued from motion; it captured an *imitation* of such a moment. It is perhaps not the same thing to begin with, but it *becomes* the same thing: a dancer’s frozen motion. Therefore, I think it is correct to define this ekphrasis as a static source image representing temporality, resulting in a static effect. We would definitely include motion and virtual time in our interpretation of such a photograph, but the ekphrasis focuses on the opposite: the stasis of the whole situation. It even underlines the transformation: “One short step from eternal art into artificial eternity”. The poem ends with a paradox that puts focus on the issue of the “eternal now” that is often associated with photography: “leaving tomorrow, that is, sixty years ago; / never again, but still at nine a.m. sharp.”

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. <http://www.isadoraduncan.org/the-foundation/about-isadora-duncan> [accessed 31. 1. 2014].

This paradox also points to the contradiction of a temporal expression that does not promote temporality but enhances stasis.

There is no narrative drive in the poem; it consists of a description which first names the subject matter of the photograph and then the associations the poetic I makes in connection to the dancer: a drifting cloud, waves, moonlight et cetera. In the third stanza her pose is described:

Thick arms raised above her head,  
 A knotted tree knee protrudes from her short tunic,  
 Left leg forward, naked foot and toes,  
 with 5 (count them) toenails.

The description of the dancer is detailed and points to her immobility: her “thick arms” that are lifted above her head, her protruding kneecap, and the left leg with its five toenails (the specific detail with the toenails underlines the detailed character of the photograph and is probably not something one would notice or think of if one looked at her while she was dancing).<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the associations with motion in the first stanza, and something that drifts and sways, there is no representation of movement in the description in the third stanza; here she is already “wrested from music and motion”: the photograph has turned her into a static object.

### Concluding remarks

Clearly there are differences between media, but the difference between verbal printed text and visual, static, iconic media is not simply that one is temporal and the other atemporal. On the modality level, they are both materially static, and they can both represent temporality, although by different means. The describer’s choice regarding static and dynamic texts must once again be emphasized. Even though some images are perhaps more suitable for a narrative description and others more suited for a static description, there is always the choice of resisting the narrative or static impulse and doing it differently. Research has shown that there are different types of describers, but I do not think that we are limited to our own cognitive inclina-

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15 In the original language, the word “five” is put in brackets after the number 5, which underlines the detailed character of the photograph, also captured in the translation.

tions, especially not in the aesthetic process of transforming pictures into words.

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